



UNITED STATES ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY
REGION IX
75 Hawthorne Street
San Francisco, CA 94105

April 27, 2015

Ms. Colleen Sievers
RMP Project Manager
Carson City RMP
BLM Carson City District Office
5665 Morgan Mill Road
Carson City, Nevada 89701

Subject: Draft Resource Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement, Carson City, Churchill, Douglas, Lyon, Mineral, Nye, Storey, and Washoe Counties, Nevada and Alpine, Lassen, and Plumas Counties, California (CEQ # 20140339)

Dear Ms. Sievers:

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has reviewed the Draft Resource Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement (Draft RMP/EIS) pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act, Council on Environmental Quality regulations (40 CFR Parts 1500-1508), and Section 309 of the Clean Air Act.

Based on our review of the Draft RMP/EIS, we have rated the preferred alternative (Alternative E) and the document as *Environmental Concerns – Insufficient Information* (EC-2) (see the enclosed "Summary of EPA Rating Definitions"). The rating is based on our concerns regarding the potential impacts to riparian areas from livestock grazing. We are concerned that 4,797,200 acres would be made available for grazing (compared to just 6,100 acres that would be excluded) when the great majority of riparian areas assessed by the BLM in the planning area are currently are not in proper functioning condition, and are expected to continue in a downward trend.

We recommend that the BLM consider designating, in the preferred alternative, more acres in the planning area as unavailable for livestock grazing. We also recommend that the BLM consider the framework for livestock grazing proposed for Alternative C, the alternative that was developed to be consistent with the sage-grouse habitat management allocations of the Nevada and Northeastern California Greater Sage-Grouse Draft Land Use Plan Amendment/EIS. Alternative C would designate 2,702,000 acres as unavailable for livestock grazing and reduce effects from livestock grazing on sensitive water resources.

We also recommend that the BLM ensure that the Final RMP/EIS is consistent with the Council on Environmental Quality's recently released "Revised Draft Guidance for Federal Departments and Agencies on Consideration of Greenhouse Gas Emissions and the Effects of Climate Change in NEPA Reviews." Our detailed comments are enclosed.

We appreciate the opportunity to review this Draft RMP/EIS, and are available to discuss our comments. When the Final RMP/EIS is released for public review, please send one hard copy and one CD to the address above (mail code: ENF-4-2). If you have any questions, please contact me at 415-972-3521, or Jason Gerdes, the lead reviewer for this project. Mr. Gerdes can be reached at 415-947-4221 or gerdes.jason@epa.gov.

Sincerely,



For

Kathleen Martyn Goforth, Manager
Environmental Review Section

Enclosures: Summary of EPA Rating Definitions
EPA Detailed Comments

SUMMARY OF EPA RATING DEFINITIONS*

This rating system was developed as a means to summarize the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) level of concern with a proposed action. The ratings are a combination of alphabetical categories for evaluation of the environmental impacts of the proposal and numerical categories for evaluation of the adequacy of the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT OF THE ACTION

"LO" (Lack of Objections)

The EPA review has not identified any potential environmental impacts requiring substantive changes to the proposal. The review may have disclosed opportunities for application of mitigation measures that could be accomplished with no more than minor changes to the proposal.

"EC" (Environmental Concerns)

The EPA review has identified environmental impacts that should be avoided in order to fully protect the environment. Corrective measures may require changes to the preferred alternative or application of mitigation measures that can reduce the environmental impact. EPA would like to work with the lead agency to reduce these impacts.

"EO" (Environmental Objections)

The EPA review has identified significant environmental impacts that should be avoided in order to provide adequate protection for the environment. Corrective measures may require substantial changes to the preferred alternative or consideration of some other project alternative (including the no action alternative or a new alternative). EPA intends to work with the lead agency to reduce these impacts.

"EU" (Environmentally Unsatisfactory)

The EPA review has identified adverse environmental impacts that are of sufficient magnitude that they are unsatisfactory from the standpoint of public health or welfare or environmental quality. EPA intends to work with the lead agency to reduce these impacts. If the potentially unsatisfactory impacts are not corrected at the final EIS stage, this proposal will be recommended for referral to the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ).

ADEQUACY OF THE IMPACT STATEMENT

"Category 1" (Adequate)

EPA believes the draft EIS adequately sets forth the environmental impact(s) of the preferred alternative and those of the alternatives reasonably available to the project or action. No further analysis or data collection is necessary, but the reviewer may suggest the addition of clarifying language or information.

"Category 2" (Insufficient Information)

The draft EIS does not contain sufficient information for EPA to fully assess environmental impacts that should be avoided in order to fully protect the environment, or the EPA reviewer has identified new reasonably available alternatives that are within the spectrum of alternatives analysed in the draft EIS, which could reduce the environmental impacts of the action. The identified additional information, data, analyses, or discussion should be included in the final EIS.

"Category 3" (Inadequate)

EPA does not believe that the draft EIS adequately assesses potentially significant environmental impacts of the action, or the EPA reviewer has identified new, reasonably available alternatives that are outside of the spectrum of alternatives analysed in the draft EIS, which should be analysed in order to reduce the potentially significant environmental impacts. EPA believes that the identified additional information, data, analyses, or discussions are of such a magnitude that they should have full public review at a draft stage. EPA does not believe that the draft EIS is adequate for the purposes of the NEPA and/or Section 309 review, and thus should be formally revised and made available for public comment in a supplemental or revised draft EIS. On the basis of the potential significant impacts involved, this proposal could be a candidate for referral to the CEQ.

*From EPA Manual 1640, Policy and Procedures for the Review of Federal Actions Impacting the Environment

U.S. EPA DETAILED COMMENTS ON THE DRAFT RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PLAN AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT, CARSON CITY, CHURCHILL, DOUGLAS, LYON, MINERAL, NYE, STOREY, AND WASHOE COUNTIES NEVADA, AND ALPINE, LASSEN, AND PLUMAS COUNTIES, CALIFORNIA, APRIL 27, 2015

Livestock Grazing

The Draft RMP/EIS lists several goals for the management actions proposed for Alternative E, the preferred alternative. Among these, are to “maintain or improve the condition of the public rangelands so ecological functions that sustainably provide for forage and other uses are met” (p. 2-109), and to “improve riparian and wetland lotic and lentic areas (proper functioning condition [PFC] and functioning at risk with an upward trend) to 85 percent, progressing towards or attaining PFC over the next 20 years,” and to continue “improving riparian and wetland lotic and lentic areas so that 100 percent are progressing towards or attaining PFC within the next 30 years” (p. 2-39).

The management actions for livestock grazing proposed for Alternative E, however, seem incompatible with these goals. Alternative E would make 4,797,200 acres, the most acres of any action alternative (along with Alternative B) available to livestock grazing; just 6,100 acres, less than one percent of the planning area, would be deemed not available (p. ES-11). This level of proposed livestock grazing is a concern, as the Draft RMP/EIS states that one of the major vegetation issues in the planning area is that “many of the ecological systems are out of balance and will require management changes and/or reclamation to restore resilient ecological systems” (p. 3-42). One manifestation of this lack of balance is a reduced resilience to disturbance in the planning area, which the Draft RMP/EIS describes as “skewed functional structural groups,” which can be caused by a variety of factors, such as historic or current overgrazing” (p. 3-42).

Additionally, the Draft RMP/EIS describes a Rangeland Health Assessment that surveyed 38 allotments across the planning area between 2007 and 2012 and concludes that 69 percent of the land assessed did not meet the standard for riparian and wetlands (Standard 2), and 58 percent did not meet the standard for plant and animal habitat (Standard 4) (p. 3-33). That a large majority of the riparian areas in the planning area are not in proper functioning condition is important, because, as described in the Draft RMP/EIS, “riparian systems are about 4 percent of the planning area, but provide a much greater percentage of the desirable resources for livestock, wild horses, wildlife, and recreationists” (p. 3-39). Concentrated livestock “can heavily impact riparian areas, resulting in compacted soils, loss of plant species diversity, and the introduction and spread of invasive species” (p. 3-45).

We note that Alternative E proposes livestock grazing management “at existing levels,” with a BLM commitment “to re-examine and adjust use levels to appropriate animal unit month amount every 10 years or on a case-by-case basis” (4-97). Yet grazing pressure on rangelands from livestock and wild horses and burros is anticipated to continue (p. 4-89), and the Rapid Ecoregional Assessment that was conducted for the planning area indicates that many grazing allotments are “projected to experience significant temperature increases” (p. 3-13), which could have profound effects on the vegetation that livestock depend on for forage.

We also note that Alternative C, the alternative that would designate 2,702,000 acres as unavailable for livestock grazing—and was developed in part to be consistent with the sage-grouse habitat management allocations of the Nevada and Northeastern California Greater Sage-Grouse Draft Land Use Plan Amendment/EIS (“Sage-Grouse EIS”)—would “reduce effects from livestock grazing on water resources” (p. 4-97). We understand that the Sage-Grouse EIS will be completed prior to the Carson

City District Final RMP/EIS and that decisions made in that separate process will inform management decisions for this proposed action.

Recommendations:

- For Alternative E, the EPA recommends that the BLM designate more than just 6100 acres, or less than 1% of the planning area, as “unavailable for livestock grazing” to better protect riparian systems.
- Consider revising Alternative E to reflect the same “unavailable for livestock grazing” acreage (2,702,000 acres) as identified in the Sage-Grouse EIS.
- We recommend that the BLM wait to complete a Final RMP/EIS and Record of Decision for the proposed action until the Sage-Grouse EIS decisionmaking process is completed to alleviate the need to revisit decisions. For example, if recommended management actions through the Carson City RMP/EIS process are in place, but are not consistent with decisions made through the Sage-Grouse EIS, additional NEPA documentation may be necessary.

Climate Change

Several activities outlined in the Draft RMP/EIS have the potential to have both direct and indirect impacts associated with climate change, specifically greenhouse gases. The Draft RMP/EIS determined that certain activities in the proposed action and its alternatives would contribute to GHG emissions while others would have a negligible impact to GHG emissions. However, a qualitative analysis of climate change was included in the Draft RMP/EIS rather than quantitative estimates of GHG emissions. In addition, the cumulative impacts from the BLM-authorized activities were determined to be small in comparison with regional and global emissions. We appreciate the Draft RMP/EIS highlighting that management actions implemented to reduce other pollutants will have co-benefits of reducing GHGs in many cases. We believe that the Council on Environmental Quality’s (CEQ) December 2014 Revised Draft Guidance for Federal Agencies’ Consideration of GHG Emissions and Climate Change offers a reasonable approach for conducting analyses of GHGs and climate change impacts.

Recommendations:

- Quantify the potential GHG emissions associated with the proposed RMP if the emissions are expected to be greater than 25,000 metric tons of CO₂-e emissions/year or if quantification would easily accomplished, and use those emissions as a proxy for climate change impacts.
- We recommend that you do not compare the GHG emissions to total U.S. emissions, as this approach does not provide meaningful information for a project level analysis. Consider providing a frame of reference, such as an applicable Federal, state, tribal or local goal for GHG emission reductions, and discuss whether the emissions levels are consistent with such goals.
- Acknowledge the programmatic nature of the RMP/EIS and provide a framework regarding how GHG and climate change issues will be addressed in future site and resource specific NEPA reviews.